

OLE BONES DEY DONE SPEAK

Proposal for a one-hour film

Slaves in Quebec? Brought in by United Empire Loyalists?

I've lived in Quebec for most of my 66 years. I am a descendant of a Loyalist. He was one of the pioneer settlers of the Eastern Townships of Quebec. I never heard there were slaves in Quebec, or that Loyalists brought them here.

Until last February, during Black History Month. That's when I read an interview in the Montreal Gazette with a black school teacher named Hank Avery. He was saying that there was a slave cemetery near his home in the Eastern Townships which had never been properly recognized, and that it was located on a piece of land first settled by a United Empire Loyalist.

I was amazed. I gave Hank Avery a call. We have seen each other frequently since then. What follows is a capsule of the story that I have learned from him. It's the kind of story that good films are made of. A film inspired by this story would jolt Canadians awake to a dim but formative part of their past.

Saint-Armand is a peaceful little farm town in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, 80 kms south-east of Montreal, and 2 kms from the US border. On August 5, 1997, that peace was severely interrupted by a stormy meeting of the town council, when an angry Deputy Mayor stonewalled a committee recommendation that a black slave cemetery on his father's property be designated a historic site. A shouting match ensued, and continued as the council dispersed into the street.

The committee that made the recommendation to the St. Armand town council had been set up at the initiative of Hank Avery.

He is a highly respected teacher at a primary school in the nearby town of Bedford. He is one of only a handful of black inhabitants of the Eastern Townships. He immigrated from Pennsylvania in 1971 in order to avoid being drafted during the Vietnam war. He took a degree in education at Concordia University, married a French-Canadian woman, had two children, and settled down as a grade-three teacher in Bedford. He became well known and loved as the director of the school choir, as the teacher who took his kids on bus tours of the historic sites of the region, and as a balladeer who sang old favourites in local coffee houses.

Bedford is the commercial and civic centre of Missisquoi County, first settled by United Empire Loyalists who fled up Lake Champlain during the American Revolution. Many of them brought slaves with them--slaves who were put to work clearing the wilderness in Missisquoi County. They tilled and harvested the fields, tended the livestock, cut the firewood, built the roads. They were housed in segregated shanty towns similar to the

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wretched ones they had left behind in the U.S. They had to bury their dead in segregated cemeteries. They had to do without tomb-stones, in order to avoid desecration. And when slaves were finally liberated in Canada in the early 1800s, they left their unpleasant shanty towns and moved to the cities, leaving their burial grounds behind, unattended.

One of them was in St. Armand.

On the road-side edge of a field of pasture just outside Saint-Armand, there is a tomb-stone with the name of Colonel Philip Luke inscribed on it. It is well protected with a surrounding fence. Luke settled on this property in 1781. It was bought from Luke's descendants in 1950 by a farmer called Clément Benoit.

In the same pasture, but further from the road, is a slab of black limestone rock which stands 6 metres high, and extends for 30 metres. It is known in the area as "Nigger Rock", because at its foot is where Col. Luke's slaves were allowed to bury their dead. This burial ground is un-marked and un-protected.

In the fall of 1996, rumours spread in Missisquoi County that farmer Benoit had scooped up earth at the foot of Nigger Rock to shore up a barn, and that he had found human remains.

Hank Avery, a descendant of slaves, decided to check it out. He went to see Benoit. Benoit admitted to him that he had ploughed the burial mound by mistake, but not recently. It was shortly after he bought the property in 1950. He realized his mistake when human bones were uncovered, and he re-buried them in the same place. When Avery asked him if he would allow a plaque to be inserted in the Rock in honour of the slaves who had helped open up Missisquoi County, Benoit said he would be willing to consider it, but that he didn't want tourists "walking all over my property".

Avery felt obligated to do what he could to restore lost honour for "these departed brothers and sisters". He felt the only proper way to do it would be to get Nigger Rock designated as a historic site. He found out that municipal historic sites are under provincial jurisdiction, and that an application would have to be made to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs by the town council of St. Armand. So he made his case to the town council at their monthly meeting in March, 1997. Mayor Brent Chamberlin, owner of a truck depot, was a neighbour of Benoit. He seemed sympathetic, and got the council to appoint a committee to prepare the application.

As a member of that committee, Avery found out that Nigger Rock was already listed in the Registry of la Commission de Toponymie du Québec as "Nigger, Rocher", nestled on page 1241 between "Nigger Rapids" of Gatineau and "Nigger's Point" of Témiscamingue. He also found out that there remained only two marked black burial grounds in the whole of Canada: one in Birchtown, Nova Scotia, and the other in Priceville, Ontario. Where were all the other slaves buried? Had their burial grounds been ploughed under by mistake or intention? These were questions that needed to be put to the general public. So Avery called in the media.



And they came in droves. Someone had evidence that slavery once existed in Canada? It was front-page news. Reporters arrived first from the Brome County News, then from the Sherbrooke Record, then La Voix de l'Est, then the Montreal Gazette, then La Presse, then the Saint John Telegraph Journal, then the Calgary Herald, then the Boston Globe. Avery was interviewed by news crews from most of the Quebec TV networks. Human rights activists came out from Montreal to express their solidarity. Letters of support arrived from far and wide, including a class of children in Calgary. Louise Beaudoin, Quebec's Minister of Cultural Affairs, told the media that she would "listen with interest" to any request to have the cemetery designated a historic site.

One of the most interesting people to show up was the Montreal poet Bernadette Charles, a black immigrant from Grenada, wife of an Italian-Canadian, mother of three, a student of political science at Concordia University, and operator of a beauty saloon on the West Island. She writes about slavery and its consequences, and she reads her poetry in public like another Yevtushenko, with grace and power.

She first went to see Benoit. His son Réjean was there, the general manager of the farm. He gave her a friendly reception. Then she went to see Avery. Then she went to the meeting of the St. Armand council of August 5.

That is when the site committee came back to report. It recommended that the name of Nigger Rock be changed to Slave Rock, that the Ministry of Cultural Affairs be asked to designate it as a historic site, and that it be made accessible to the public.

That's when the storm broke. Mayor Chamberlin was absent due to an accident in one of his trucks. The Deputy Mayor was in the chair. He was Rodrigue Benoit, brother of Clément. He refused to allow the recommendations to be voted on. "Give us a tangible proof that people were buried there. You can't go putting up markers all over the place just because someone thinks there may be a cemetery someplace. It's a matter of administering public funds responsibly. Go back and do more work". Avery couldn't believe his ears. The meeting turned into a shouting match. Bernadette did what she could to help people calm down.

Soon after that, Avery's mother came up from Pennsylvania to visit him. It was her first time in Canada. "Where are all the black people?" she wanted to know. Avery answered that he only knew of one besides himself in the whole of the Eastern townships. She watched the annual parade of the Bedford Fair go by Hank's front door, and saw kids on every float wave at her son and yell "Hi Mr. A!" She asked Hank if he were the Pope or something.

But the committee appointed by the St. Armand town council never met again. Through their large land holdings and their ownership of the St. Armand general store, the Benois held the town council in their hands. Avery was left to carry on the fight for the cemetery by himself.

He continued to speak to community groups around the Eastern Townships. One of them was the Women's Auxiliary of the United Empire Loyalist Club of Waterloo. He wrote to Sheila Copps in Ottawa asking her to intervene, and got an answer saying she would look

into it. He gave newspaper interviews during Black History Month. And he cooked up a scheme with some friends for purchasing 25 acres of land next to the Benoit farm and turning it into a memorial park.

Then early last summer, one of his teaching colleagues advised Hank to call it off, at least for a while. A friend of this colleague had over-heard Clément Benoit say to one of his sons that "it wouldn't be a bad idea if an unexplained accident happened to Avery". So Hank cooled it, and devoted the rest of the summer to his second vocation as a carpenter, re-constructing the house of a neighbour.

In the fall, Clément Benoit died of heart failure, at the age of 72, and bequeathed the farm to his sons Charles and Réjean. It was an opportunity for a fresh start. And a chance to tell the story in film.

THE FILM

I helped get the ball moving in late January by calling Bernadette Charles, the voice that calmed the storm at the town council meeting two years ago. She exudes warmth, trust, and a passion for overcoming the racial divide. I told her that Avery was looking for a way to re-establish contact with the Benoit family. She remembered the friendly reception she'd received from Réjean Benoit when she had visited him and his father in 1997, so she agreed to give him a call.

As there are still bitter feelings between Benoit and Avery, Bernadette had to think of a first approach that didn't include Avery. She told Benoit that I was trying to get a film going, and asked if he wouldn't like to tell his side of the story. He agreed to meet with me.

At that meeting, I was struck by Benoit's intelligence and his willingness to dialogue in English, although he is probably an "indépendentiste". He told us that he had been one of the group of St. Armand residents who had got a plaque installed in the town square in honour of the patriots of 1837. A skirmish connected to that rebellion apparently took place in the area. He said that it had been hard for people like himself to come to terms with Mohawk territorial claims, although he had finally done so, and that the recent confrontation with the Mohawks over Oka made this a difficult time for his family to deal also with claims of recognition from descendants of slaves. He seemed open himself to the idea of designating Nigger Rock a historic site, but made it clear that his brothers would be adamantly opposed. As an alternative, he said he would support the idea of installing another plaque in the town square, similar to the one in honour of the patriots of 1837, but this time in honour of the slaves who helped develop the area.

As a way of bringing the issue back into the public domain, Benoit made the remarkable suggestion that Bernadette do a public reading of her poetry about slavery in the St. Armand library during Black History Month, and offered to speak to Hubert Paquin, the librarian, about it. Paquin agreed to the idea, and the event is now scheduled for Saturday night, February 26.

So the stage is now set for Avery to get moving again. And now the story can be put on film. Because Avery is going to have to go through all the same motions he went through once before, except that this time he will be followed by my camera. He is going to have to re-awaken Mayor Chamberlin's interest, get the committee re-constituted, gather the evidence, rally public support, lobby members of the town council. It is not going to be easy. There were members of the council who backed up the Deputy Mayor when he stonewalled the committee in 1997. They just may represent a predominant view in our country--that this is a past that is best forgotten.

And along the way, Avery is going to have to make some tough decisions as to how far he's willing to go in making compromises. If the Benoit family proves difficult to deal with, would he be willing to negotiate a deal which would get a plaque installed at Nigger Rock in exchange for the closure of the area to public access? And if they refused even that, which is a real possibility, does he apply the pressure by bringing in the media again, or does he accept Réjean's alternative of a monument in the town square? And if it's the latter, does he agree to keeping it a local issue by having it financed locally, or does he follow the example of Birchtown, Nova Scotia, and get St. Armand designated by the provincial and federal governments as a historic site?

By the time Avery has passed all these difficult stages, the film will have revealed a lot about how race relations work in this part of the country, and what this reflects about our past.

Avery's personal struggle will be the back-bone of the film. We will see him as teacher, as skilled carpenter, as amateur musician, as entertaining story-teller, and as the only black man for a hundred miles around. We will see him teaching a regular grade 3 class; conducting a rehearsal of the school choir; taking his pupils on a bus tour of the historical sites of Bedford; brushing up on his history of Canadian blacks with Dorothy Williams (author of "A History of Blacks in Montreal"); visiting the remains of shanty towns in Missisquoi County with Reggie Paul, an old game warden who knows the territory; jamming with Bernadette Charles and her Carribean musical friends; lobbying St. Armand town councillors with Deiter Steiche, a fellow teacher and chairman of the committee; plotting media coverage with black journalist Edmund Gay (editor of the Montreal weekly "Community Contact").

Avery's mother should be brought up from Pennsylvania to witness Hank's bold venture, to tell his friends about some of the less useful adventures of his youth, and to offer her words of wry wisdom: "don't let the shit stick on you", or if you have to take the offensive, "kill with kindness".

Avery's discussions with his mother and his friends will reveal what not enough of us know about slavery in Canada--that at the time of the British conquest, there were 1,000 slaves under the French regime, two-thirds of them Amerindians; that 5,000 blacks were brought into Canada by the United Empire Loyalists, most of them as slaves; that many of them fled back to Vermont and New York, two states that liberated slaves after the War of Independence; that slaves were sold in the open market in Montreal up to 1797; that they

could be arrested for attempted escape until 1833, when slavery was finally abolished by the British Parliament.

These discussions could be illustrated with graphics about slavery from the collection at the Montreal McCord Museum.

The filming should start with Bernadette Charles' performance at the St. Armand library on February 26. Our main characters will be there--Hank Avery and Réjean Benoit--as well as some of the minor ones--Mayor Chamberlin (an anglophone), Norman Paquin (the francophone librarian), Dorothy Williams (the historian). Williams will probably speak. Out of her words, and out of one of Bernadette's poems, could be constructed the film's narration.

Here is the poem Bernadette wrote inspired by Nigger Rock. She will read it accompanied by a drummer.

Ole bones dey done speak
From ole timers farms,
Where once black limbs toiled
From fore-day morn till sundown.
Memories, they remember praying slaves
Abandonment is their song.
Slave ancestry whisper secret thoughts,
Pss...pss...gran chile
Look pass the bickerin, pass the accusin,
Pass the pointin finger, pass the jealous tones.
Pass the stains on dem tear-washed quilts,
Look towards dem lonesome missing patches,
Cause there's still work to be done.

Pss...pss...gran child, weave on.
Weave in silvery locks of moon-beam,
Weave in cottoned-textured strands of hair.
Weave rainbows on empty sheets, with tear drops.
Weave in the glistenin of hopeful dreams.
Weave some shining into eyes that have seen
Countless irreverent morns.

Gran chile, ah say weave on.
Weave promises and hopes still lost.
Weave lady freedom's clenched fists.
Weave frozen brown lips still aching
From kissing the snow-queen's ass
Cause abandonment is still our song

Breathe on, gran chile, work on

**Walk proudly along snow-carpeted townships
Where once hopeful promises beckoned
in northern starlight,
Where once African drum-beat breathed
The lush sweetness of freedom,
Till mind and matter ceased to be.**

**Once there was joy, here there was love.
Oh amazing Canada how sweet your sound!
No grave or stone can strap us down.
No whip or chain can mark us now,
Cause we're protected by the gift of love.
Ole bones, they will sing from your township farms,
Crooning the missing verses of Canada's soul song.**

**Martin Duckworth
4 February, 2000**